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# Walt Whitman: His Dominant Themes

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WALT WHITMAN : HIS DOMINANT THEMES

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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### VITA AUCTORIS

The author was born in Chicago, Illinois, on the fifth of January, 1915. He attended the elementary schools of that city, and entered the Carter H. Harrison High School there in 1929. Upon graduation from that institution he attended the University of Illinois, taking the degree of Bachelor of Arts in June, 1935. From the Autumn of 1936 until the Spring of 1938 he took graduate work in literature at the University of Chicago. In September, 1938, entered Loyola University of Chicago as a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts, fulfilling the requirements for that degree in June, 1940.

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## THE MAN

Leaves of Grass is not merely the record of genius struggling for expression but also the annal of the poverty, ignorance, ecstasy, and adventure that shaped the man who wrote it. As Wordsworth could not have been the poet he was if he had not been born in the Lake Country, so Whitman could not have written the Leaves if he had not come of workmen parentage, if he had not early to shift for himself, and if he was not surrounded by that boundless expanse of possibility and opportunity, America.

The war was the climax of Whitman's life, and, as he said, though he had "made a start" before it, his greatest passions would have "come to nought" had it not occurred.

Whitman's life can be divided into three general periods. The first, that of his youth, dates from 1819 to 1848. The second is that in which he wrote his important work, and extends from 1849 to 1873. The latter date has a double significance. It is the year in which he suffered his severest paralytic stroke, causing him to move to Camden and into the house of George Whitman; it is also the year in which his mother died. The final period is that between 1874 and the year of his death, 1892. It is a time of incessant ailment and disintegration, of lingering illness and slow death.

He was born at West Hills, Long Island, in 1819. The vicinity is now suburban, and not rural at all, being located near Huntington, about twenty-five miles to the northeast of New York City. The farm on which he was born belonged to the Whitman family for 150 years, but his father left it when Walt was scarcely four, moving to Brooklyn. The children, however, frequently returned to the old place, and Walt especially spent many long summer days in the thickly wooded hills along the Sound. It is these days that gives the place its importance, rather than the fact that he was born there. It accounts for an influence of trees, flowers, birds, and most important of all--the sea--upon a poet of a very urban and constantly changing environment, and it is this influence that perhaps struck deepest into his inner life and imagination.

He came of good stock. Late in life he wrote: "As to loving and disinterested parents, no boy or man ever had more cause to bless or thank them than I." Whitman himself believed that his heredity "stamp" came mainly from his mother's side, but it can be plainly seen, especially in the later years, that there was a good deal of his father in him. His mother, the daughter of a Dutch father and an English (or Welsh) mother of Quaker tradition, exposed Whitman to the most impressive religious experiences of his life, the preachings of an unorthodox Quaker named Hicks. These possibilities partially account for the vein of mysticism running through so many of Whitman's

poems. There is no way to determine that this was the case. With varying degrees of emphasis, most critics mention it as a possibility.

The poet's father was more of a carpenter than a farmer, and practiced that trade when the family moved from West Hills. In his youth Whitman was always near the water-side. Many years afterwards, in the first of the Sea-Drift poems, he recalls how, as a boy, he would leave his bed and wander "alone, bareheaded, barefoot" along the shore. Those nocturnal walks are re-echoed in the verses:

"Soothe! soothe! soothe!  
Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,  
And again another behind embracing and lapping,  
every one close,  
But my love soothes not me, not me."<sup>1</sup>

The sea also gives the answers to the questionings of love:

"Whereto answering, the sea,  
Delaying not, hurrying not,  
Whispered me through the night, and very plainly  
before daybreak,  
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,  
And again death, death, death, death..."<sup>2</sup>

There is more in the poem, of course, than there was in the experience; that is generally the case with good poems. But the poem points back unmistakably to a boy who began very early to feel the mystery of life and death and the companionship of land and sea.

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1. Whitman, Leaves of Grass, p.57

2. Ibid., p.58

Another point might be made in regard to his heritage. Whitman was of rebel stock. His ancestors on both sides served with Washington's army. There is a record of one of his forbears having been captured and imprisoned by the British. Thus it can be seen that Walt had freedom in his blood as well as in the air of his country and time. The ardour for freedom is well, if trivially illustrated in the colonial reception of General Lafayette on his fourth visit to the United States in 1824. The Marquis was then regarded as the touchstone of Liberty, and throngs of children encircled him on the occasion of his laying the cornerstone of the public library of Brooklyn. Numerous records relate how, upon dismounting from his canary-colored carriage, Lafayette picked up the chubby five year old Dutch boy, kissed him on both cheeks, and set him down again. Walt mentions the incident in his prose works, as he does his first (probably only) glimpse of John Jacob Astor, a "bent, feeble, but stoutly built old man, bearded, swathed in furs, with a great ermine cap on his head, led and assisted, almost carried, down the steps of his high front stoop...and then lifted and tuck'd in a gorgeous sleigh, enveloped in other furs, for a ride."<sup>1</sup> Types, especially of the coming American democracy, made a lasting impression upon the mind of young Walt Whitman.

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1. Whitman, Prose Works, p.12



His schooling was scanty. The public schools of Brooklyn, then in their infancy, limited the instructions to reading, writing, arithmetic--with a little grammar and geography creeping occasionally into the curriculum. Walt left school permanently at thirteen, and none of his teachers had left sufficient impression upon him to gain mention in any of his records. Despite the interest that his poems display for foreign terms, he never learned any language but English. It can readily be seen that his French and Spanish borrowings are words of the commonest type--"Camerado," "En Masse," and the personal pronouns that he frequently uses--while a good portion are sheer inventions and not borrowings at all. However, he did love to read, and during the days he spent as an errand boy in the office of a lawyer named Clarke, many hours were spent with the Arabian Nights, and the novels of Scott and Cooper.

His boyhood really ended with his induction into the field of journalism as a type-setter for the Long Island Patriot, a weekly sheet owned by the postmaster of Brooklyn. He was evidently a lazy apprentice. His own notes record his "being down Long Island more or less every summer, now east, now west, sometimes months at a stretch." George Whitman, writing to a cousin during this period, mentions that "everyone in the family is working--except Walt," and Mr. Clarke, though evidently a kind employer, and in favor of the boy's reading, relates that "if he caught the ague he would be too lazy to shake."

Like many another young printer, Whitman soon felt the urge toward composition. "The first time I wanted to write anything enduring," he wrote in his old age, "was when I saw a ship under full sail, and had the desire to describe it exactly as it appeared to me." His prose records that he had written certain "sentimental bits" for the Patriot, and shortly afterwards "had a piece or two in George P. Morris's then celebrated and fashionable Mirror in New York City. I remember with what half-suppressed excitement I used to watch for the big, fat, red-faced, slow-moving, very old English carrier who used to distribute the Mirror in Brooklyn; and when I got one, opening and cutting the 1 leaves with trembling hands. How it made my heart double-beat to see my piece on the pretty white paper in nice type!"<sup>1</sup>

It is evident that the conceited pleasure he felt in any tangible representation of himself was manifest early in his life, and that the pride he took in his printed compositions was quite unaffected by any awareness of their literary shortcomings.

About his eighteenth year he became restless again, and tried school-teaching in Queens and Suffolk Counties. He "boarded round," and characteristically enough, thought this one of the best experiences of his life. The only thing we know definitely about his brief career as a school teacher was gathered from an interview in 1894 with Charles A. Roe,<sup>1</sup> who was his stu-

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1. Whitman, Prose, p.135

dent in Flushing. The results of this interview are summed up briefly by Mr. Perry:

"Young Whitman had original ideas, it appears, about teaching mental arithmetic; was fond of describing objects and incidents to his scholars; had authority without severity; was decidedly serious and earnest in manner; was diffident with women and 'not religious in any way,' to the especial regret of a friendly mother of four daughters, with whom he boarded. He was already reputed to have written poetry. He dressed neatly in a black frock coat, was of beautiful complexion and rugged health, and spent every possible moment out of doors. In short, Mr. Roe reported him as 'a man out of the average, who strangely attracted our respect and attention.'" 1

But the young schoolmaster "with ideas of his own" soon turned to something that served better than teaching in a rural community as an outlet to a wider, deeper circle of experience. What more appealing to a restless, vigorous young printer than the editing, composing, and distributing of his own paper? Walt tells it in his own words:

"I went to New York, bought a press and types, hired some little help, but did most of the work myself, including the press work. Everything seemed turning out well (only my restlessness prevented my gradually establishing a permanent property there). I bought a good horse, and every week went all around the country serving my papers, devoting one day and night to it. I never had happier jaunts....The experiences of those jaunts, the dear old-fashioned farmers and their wives, the stops by the hayfields, the hospitality, the nice dinners, occasionally evenings, the girls, the rides through the brush, and the smell from the salt of the South roads, come up in my memory to this day, after more than forty years." 2

Whitman's appetite for life was almost satisfied during his days as publisher of the Long Islander. How the Leaves echo

1. Bliss Perry, Walt Whitman, p.16

2. Whitman, Prose, p.217

the longing for the very things he experienced then, the delight in living them once they were discovered! Throughout his life, Whitman's tastes seemed never to mature, nor, in the last analysis, even to intensify. The Whitman of seventy and the Whitman of seventeen were, basically, identical. In the former there was not even the mellowness that generally accompanies age and accumulated knowledge. The emotional endowment that the Leaves illustrate had cast its shadow before. He once wrote to Grace Gilchrist: "My boyhood was very restless and unhappy; I did not know what to do." To the same lady he wrote on another occasion: "I had run miles away from the scene" (where someone had fallen from a scaffolding).

The unhappy fate of the poet's brothers--the eldest and youngest of whom died in the lunatic asylum--indicates the erratic strain running in the Whitman family. It was indeed very fortunate that his tremulous sensitivity to the beauties of nature drove him so early into the open air and into association with outdoor men.

In connection with his editorship of The Daily Aurora, in 1841, an account of Whitman given by one of his associates is both interesting and significant:

"Whitman had, at twenty-two, the look of a man of thirty, tall and graceful in appearance, neat in attire, and possessed a very pleasing and impressive eye and a cheerful, happy-looking countenance. He usually wore a frock coat and a high hat, carried a small cane, and the lapel of his coat was almost invariably ornamented with a boutonniere....After he looked over the daily exchange

papers (reaching the den he occupied usually between 11 and 12 o'clock), it was Mr. Whitman's habit to stroll down Broadway to the Battery, spending an hour or two amid the trees and enjoying the water view, returning to the office location at about 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon." 1

Of his early publications, after his dismissal from the Aurora, the proprietor of which, incidentally, referred to him as "the laziest fellow who ever undertook to edit a city newspaper," nothing need be said, though a letter from Whitman to the Washington Globe and printed in that paper on February 26, 1842, in which he defends Dickens, then making his first American tour, is too prophetic and significant to omit. Whitman states:

"A 'democratic writer' is one, the tendency of whose pages is to destroy those old landmarks which pride and fashion have set up, making impossible distinctions between brethren of the Great Family....I consider Mr. Dickens to be a democratic writer. The familiarity with low life wherein Mr. Dickens places his readers is a wholesome familiarity....I cannot lose the opportunity of saying how much I love and esteem him for what he has taught me through his writings." 2

Even grammatically there is here an element of misdirection, of fumbling in the dark. It is probable that in Whitman's deliberate, turgid mind there was evolving the first recognizable form of the Democratic Vista, and he sought to secure it by whatever means he could muster, to locate it so that it could be more closely examined and its properties revealed. Whitman was never successful in doing this, though in later years his concept of

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1. William Cauldwell, in the New York Times, quoted in The Conservator, July, 1901.

2. Whitman, "Boz and Democracy," in the Washington Globe, February 26, 1842, quoted in Perry, Walt Whitman, p. 26

democracy, and consequently of "a democratic writer" became a great deal more specific and comprehensive than was the concept of 1842.

Nevertheless, Whitman's concept of democracy was always somewhat vacillating and inconsistent. One of its inconsistencies was particularly flagrant, and that was in regard to the question of the Blacks. The institution of slavery had persisted longer in New York than in any other state in the North. Whitman's people had been slave-holders and he had a very vivid recollection of some of the aged freedmen who stayed out at West Hills. Walt himself once remarked to Horace Traubel, "After all, I may have been tainted a bit, just a little bit, with the New York feeling with regard to anti-slavery," and, as Arvin notes, Whitman was not overstating the case in the least. Despite his exultations in the glory of the Vista, Walt's sympathy for the Negro as a human being, let alone as a party to the "universal brotherhood of mankind," was definitely limited, and his emotions towards these people were by no means as tender nor as expansive as the language of "Salut au Monde" would imply. In a letter written to his mother in 1868, Whitman describes a parade of Negroes, celebrating the election of a mayoralty candidate friendly to them, as "very disgusting and alarming in some respects...looking like a band of brutes let loose." Of this phase of Whitman's constitution Arvin says:

"A people cruelly degraded for generations may

well have an air of barbaric abandon, but is it easy to endure this language from Whitman?...Such was the great humanitarian's harsh estimate of an 'inferior' people. We shall find no other dose so acrid or so hard to swallow in our attempt to get at Whitman's true measure as man and poet, but if we swallow it we shall understand all the better his rather inglorious record in the days of the Abolitionists."<sup>1</sup>

Whitman's lack of intellectual integrity and his free and easy literary conscience is forcefully revealed in the circumstances surrounding the composition of his novel, without mention of which an account of his early life would be incomplete. The title was Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times. The announcement of the novel, published in November, 1842, as a single issue of the New World, a weekly story magazine, ran as follows:

"Friends of Temperance Ahoy! (Title) By a popular American author. The novel, which is dedicated to the Temperance Societies and the friends of the temperance cause throughout the United States, will create a sensation, both for the ability with which it is written, as well as for the interest of the subject, and will be universally read and admired. It was written expressly for the New World, by one of the best novelists in this country, with a view to aid the great and good work of reform, and rescue young men from the demon of Intemperance. The incidents of the plot are wrought out with great effect, and the influence of its moral and the beneficial effect of it will interest the friends of the Temperance Reformation in giving the Tale the widest possible circulation."

Here the hand of Whitman is unmistakeable. Who else would have classified him as "a popular American author" or, even more extravagantly, as "one of the best novelists in this country?" This serves as a perfect prelude to the laudatory self-

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1. Arvin, Whitman, p.33

reviews that Whitman was later to compose in connection with the second edition of the Leaves of Grass, wherein he hails his own "arrival" in terms as glowing as the now famous "An American bard at last!" It demonstrates not only the consuming ego of the man, but what is more important, the delusions he held concerning his own merits and significance. It is more than likely that behind these compositions there was less of a will to deceive than there was of a desire to familiarize the world with what he, Whitman, honestly believed to be a literary gem. It is certainly true that he had no inkling of the fact that, even for a gem, the Leaves were intolerably rough-cut.

But even had the readers of Franklin Evans accepted the statements of its author as to its excellencies, they assuredly would have felt duped were they acquainted with the circumstances surrounding its composition. A life-long friend of Whitman<sup>1</sup> reveals that Walt wrote the book "mostly in the reading room of Tammany Hall, which was a sort of Bohemian resort, and he afterwards told me that he frequently indulged in gin cocktails while writing it."

The years between Franklin Evans and the Leaves (1842-1855) passed without outstanding circumstance. The record of them is retained indelibly in Whitman's verse; otherwise there is little data available to follow his fortune year by year. Each is marked by a leisureliness, a curiosity, a self-indulgence.

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1. J.G.Schumaker, Esq., in New York Tribune, April 4, 1892.



Of this phase of the poet, Burroughs writes:

"Through this period, without entering into particulars, it is enough to say that he sounded all the pleasures, passions, and abandonments of life. He was young, in perfect bodily condition, and had the city of New York and its ample opportunities about him. I trace this period in some of the poems of 'Children of Adam' and occasionally in other parts of his book, including 'Calamus'."<sup>1</sup>

By his thirtieth year Whitman had seen the South and a part of what was then the West. The former experience came by way of his accepting an offer to edit a New Orleans paper, the Crescent. In Whitman's papers the New Orleans venture has no mention except that the situation "is rather a pleasant one." But his younger brother, Jeff, who accompanied him, soon grew homesick, and the two took passage north on a Mississippi steamer, making a roundabout journey homeward by way of Chicago, the Great Lakes, and Niagara Falls, finally reaching New York in June.

The trip widened the horizon for Whitman, and increased his pride in the American nationality. Since his future role was to be that of the poetic interpreter of American life and consciousness, the long journey away from Manhattan was doubly significant. New and vast horizons had been opened.

His "Book" is without a doubt the chief milestone of his life. Leaves of Grass was in no sense impromptu. In the spring of 1855 Whitman dropped his carpenter's tools (having had taken up that craft for a time upon returning from the southern trip), and began to set up the type for his book. The first

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1. John Burroughs, Notes on Whitman as Poet and Person, p.156

drafts had been written in the places he loved to frequent--the theatres, ferry-boats, buses--but they had been revised, he afterwards told Dr. Bucke, no less than five times. The book, like the lectures he composed after the journey, many of which are published in his Prose Works, demonstrates his growing desire to be articulate, to place his own stamp on others. He is quite explicit about this in "A Backward Glance". The book emerged only after a prolonged period of self-scrutiny and deep examination of his task. As poetry, very little can be said about it, nor does the critical theorizing that followed its publication clarify that issue: but as an epochal document in the history of literature it occupies a front rank for dignity and significance. In truth, it is "a book of new things."

In view of what we know of Whitman's ego, the physical appearance of the book is surprising. It is difficult to imagine Walt being diffident about the authorship of the work that had so long occupied his time and mind; yet except for a single reference to "Walt Whitman, an American" on page 29, and for the copyright notice to "Walt Whitman", the author's name is not given. However, there appeared opposite the title page a steel engraving of the author, from a daguerreotype taken by G. Harrison in 1854. It is that now famous pose of Whitman in the open-throat flannel shirt and slouch hat. The head of the bearded man is remarkably displayed, the eyes full and steady, the mouth wistful and very sensuous. If he intended it to reveal him as "one of the

toughs" he must have been disappointed.

Though an edition of eight thousand copies was planned, only eight hundred were actually printed. These went on sale in a few bookstores in New York, Boston, and Brooklyn. Whitman saw to it that all the leading periodicals received a press-copy and that various men of letters received theirs. Aside from that the book had no circulation whatsoever, and it was not until many years later that Walt was able to joke about "the one man who actually bought a copy of the 1855 edition". Its reception is elsewhere discussed.

Between 1855 and the War, Whitman's interests were almost exclusively personal. He had deserted the Democratic Party and had become a Free-Soiler and an Abolitionist, but these tendencies concerned him only secondarily. From 1857 to 1860 he devoted himself to perfecting his book, adding more than a hundred new poems, including two new groups, "Enfants d'Adam" (later changed, fortunately, to "Children of Adam") and "Calamus". The second edition, that of '61, was of 456 pages, and sold 5000 copies.

No criticism of Whitman is more unjust than that attributing to a lack of courage the fact that he did not shoulder a gun. The work he did in the "immense lazar houses filled with America's sick and wounded sons" required a tremendous courage, different perhaps from that of the battlefield, but courage nevertheless. His work in the field hospitals shows his nature at its noblest. It is difficult to omit at least one letter written by

by Walt to his mother in 1863:

"This afternoon, July 22d, I have spent a long time with Oscar F. Wilber, Company G., 154th. New York, low with chronic diarrhoea and a bad wound also. He asked me to read him a chapter in the New Testament. I complied, and ask'd what I should read. He said, 'Make your own choice.' I open'd at the close of one of the books of the evangelists, and read the chapters describing the latter hours of Christ, and the scenes of the crucifixion. The poor, wasted young man ask'd me to read the following chapter also, how Christ rose again. I read very slowly, for Oscar was feeble. It pleased him very much, for the tears were in his eyes. He asked me if I enjoy'd religion. I said 'Perhaps not, my dear, in the same way that you mean, and yet, maybe, it is the same thing'. He said, 'It is my chief reliance' ....He behaved very manly and affectionate. The kiss I gave him as I was about leaving he returned fourfold. He gave me his mother's address, Mrs. Sally D. Wilber, Alleghany Post Office, Cattacaugus County, N.Y. I had several such interviews with him. He died a few days after the one just described." 1

There is not any doubt that the strenuous work of the field hospitals damaged Walt's heretofore remarkable strength and stamina. The steady streams of the wounded from Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, in blue and grey alike, the disease rampant in the hospital camps, the extreme heat, the terrible strain upon a sensitive soul, all these took their toll. It is little wonder that Walt wrote to his mother in August of 1863: "I believe there is not much but trouble in this world, and if one hasn't any for himself he has it made up by having it brought close to him through others, and that is sometimes worse."

The last nineteen years of his life Walt lived in Camden, New Jersey. Someone once described it as the refuge of th-

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See Quoted in, Walt Whitman the Man, New York, 1896, p.107

ose in doubt, debt, or despair, but it now holds the famous tomb of Walt Whitman. It was while the poet was convalescing in Camden that W.M. Rossetti heard of his plight (Walt's little nest-egg being entirely exhausted by this time) and solicited the sale of the Leaves, sometimes at three times the regular price, among the English literati. "Those blessed gales from the British Isles probably (certainly) saved me," Whitman wrote later, "and both the cash and the emotional cheer were deep medicines." Of these "subscribers" it cannot be said that all had an intellectual interest in, much less an admiration for, Whitman and his work; yet the names include some of the best minds of the times. Though the subscription may have had a purely compassionate beginning, it can scarcely be doubted that by means of it Whitman made an impression upon minds that he otherwise probably would never have reached. It is known that writers and critics who made his acquaintance in this manner struck up correspondences that frequently continued over a long period of time; it is also known that during his lifetime Whitman was discussed more comprehensively and more intelligently in Europe than in the United States. In the group of subscribers to the Leaves appear the names of both Rossettis, Lord Houghton, Edward Dowden, Mrs. Gilchrist (whose intelligently feminine commentaries on "Calamus" are later to be quoted), Edward Carpenter, Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, W.B. Scott, Edmund Gosse, George Saintsbury, G.H. Lewes, G.H. Boughton, Alexander Ireland, Moncure Conway, A.B. Grosart, and F.D. Madox

Brown. It is little wonder that under the impression (which it was impossible for Whitman to avoid) of such eminent approval, Walt was able to ignore the mild resentment that was felt on this side of the Atlantic over the tone of the British patronage.

Even in the formation of habits generally incumbent with the approach of old age, Whitman was a non-conformist. As he neared sixty his powers of observation grew more acute than ever, but his purely creative impulse slackened until it became almost an effort for him to compose. He had already taken abode in the farmhouse on Timber Creek, and directed his attention almost exclusively to nature. He writes at this time, and the tone of his words is by no means new:

"After you have exhausted what there is in business politics, conviviality, love, and so on--have found that ~~politics none of them~~ finally, satisfy, or permanently wear--what remains? Nature remains, to bring out from their torpid recesses, the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, the change of seasons--the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night....Dear, soothing, healthy, restoration-hours!"<sup>1</sup>

He seems more and more frequently to have assumed a spiritual mood that apparently had but little antecedent in the events and behavior of the earlier years. Dr. Bucke, himself a mystic of the most pronounced type, noted this at once upon meeting Whitman for the first time, in 1877. Bucke relates that he "was amazed by the beauty and majesty of his (Whitman's) person and the gracious air of purity that surrounded and permeated

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1. Whitman, quoted in Binn's, Walt Whitman, p.204

him."<sup>1</sup> The contemplative tendencies sent him to revisit many of the scenes of those early years--West Hills, Pfaff's Restaurant, the War country. At each place he recounts long hours spent in recalling to memory the long departed figures associated with each.

May 31, 1891, was the date of the last "birthday dinner;" those jolly occasions that O'Connor and Kennedy had inaugurated nine years earlier. O'Connor was not present, this loyal friend of the poet having died in the previous year. It was a severe blow to Whitman, who during the past twenty months, had seen the passing of both Emerson and Longfellow. The evening following the last dinner he spent with Robert Ingersoll, "munching bread dipped in champagne and talking about death."

Pneumonia set in on December 21st, and a general relapse followed. He died "very quietly, in the darkening close of a soft, rainy Saturday afternoon." The service at his burial consisted of readings from Whitman, Confucius, Gautama, Jesus, the Koran, Isaiah, St. John the Zend Avesta, and Plato, along with tributes from dignitaries from both sides of the Atlantic.

Whitman's "disciples" were profoundly moved. One said later, "I felt that we had been at the entombment of Christ."

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1. Walt Whitman Fellowship Papers, VI, Philadelphia, September, 1894.

THE BOOK

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It is almost fifty years since the death of Whitman on March 27, 1892. Attempts have been made to determine his just position among the writers of the English language. Such determinings are contingent, naturally, upon a number of conditions and qualifications. Literary judgements have been no more nor any less stable than have political, historical, or philosophical judgements. With all due respect to such factors as a writer's purpose, his contemporary language and environment, and his reading public, there is not as great a fluctuation of the concept of a writer's ultimate merit as many literary "progressives" would have us believe. Aside from ephemeral prejudices, based for the most part upon other than literary considerations, there can be no serious doubt as to the approximate poetic merits of a Dante, a Shakspeare, a Wordsworth, or a Milton. Criticism and research play a most important role in the matter of textual elucidation, and certainly current literary judgements may be selected, synthesized, and incorporated with the old. But the determination of the literary merit of a work lies indubitably within the work itself, quite apart from its ever changing relation to the world of man's affairs.

It is this fact which makes the purpose of ranking or even of evaluating Whitman's work so difficult. "Who touches



this," he said of the Leaves, "touches a man," and figuratively this is hardly an overstatement. Even a casual perusal of the book bears out its author's claim.

Boynton has called the Leaves an "undefinable experience."<sup>1</sup> Reduced to literal simplicity, the term is very apt. A significant "experience" is shared in sympathetic relationship between Whitman and those who read his work. This relationship or "connection" is in itself deserving of attention as a unique and singular entity, aside from the consideration to which it is certainly entitled as one of the chief factors in the particular power that Whitman's work possesses. Aside from an occasional allusion, this relationship does not receive the attention of the critical commentators on Whitman, though no doubt when its importance is fully understood, one of the barriers between Whitman and an understanding of him will be removed.

As for the term "undefinable", Whitman himself clarifies its meaning when he writes:

"To elaborate is no avail--learned  
And unlearned feel that it is so."<sup>1</sup>

There we find evidence of the profound frustration that indicates so clearly the presence of the intellect as it contends with the intuition. To speak of it here, then, intuitively, is not a procedure incompatible to precision, inasmuch as the poet's work is obviously intuitively engendered and sustained largely by a quality quite separate from mere perception. In the passage just

1. Percy Holmes Boynton, Contemporary Americans, Boston, p.109
2. Whitman, Leaves, p.31

quoted, as well as in similar passages, the element of frustration can be recognized as a very necessary and indispensable part of the whole. The idea is conveyed by the reader's grasp of the impossibility of its being conveyed, paradoxical though that situation may seem.

In writing of the emotions he feels, Whitman frequently makes deliberate mention of a tantalizing frustration--an inability to transfer his soul to the page. He seems almost to welcome such thwarting, and to accept his own limitation of expression as an integral part of the experiences responsible for it. These deeply moving feelings and impressions he finds impossible to examine, much less to reveal to others. He knows so well that they are there, but finds it impossible to do more than ecstatically suggest their presence. The "Song of Myself" is replete with such suggestions, nor are they infrequent in other sections of the Leaves:<sup>1</sup>

"I cannot say to any person what I hear--  
I cannot say it to myself--it is very wonderful."

A few passages later the same cry is sounded:

"There is that in me--I do not know what  
it is--  
But I know it is in me."<sup>2</sup>

Stuart Sherman, summarizing a cogent account of Whitman, states:

"I recall his warning: 'Do not attempt to explain me; I cannot explain myself'. And certainly his ser-

1. Whitman, Leaves, p.50

2. Ibid., p.54

- vice to us is neither contained nor containable in an argument. He gives us the sustaining emotion which prevents argument from falling to pieces of its own dryness." <sup>1</sup>

Being so clearly apprised of this--that "his service to us is neither contained nor containable in an argument"--serves to remove another obstacle from an approach leading to an understanding of Whitman, an understanding resembling no doubt the "fond absorption" that the poet has mentioned.

But Whitman's work must be examined more closely if we are to discover its dominant themes, to decide just what its chief contentions are. It is a fact seldom unrecognized that Whitman's work is not easily amenable to categorization, either literary, sociological, or philosophical. It is impossible to overemphasize the qualifications that must be made in any critical method applied to Whitman, as differentiated from other writers, on the strength of his singularity, his profound elusiveness, and particularly his abhorrence for pigeon-holing and cut-and-dried classifying. Those writers who have attempted to regard the poet in the light of his effect upon his readers leave but little room for doubt as to their conclusions. Oscar Lovell Triggs is among the most explicit of them:

"If Leaves of Grass is not something more than a new collation of phrases, if it is not something more than a new literary method, if it does not embody a new human experience, if it is not a new revelation of truth, then it is without meaning, and doomed soon to pass

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1. Sherman, Americans, p.116

utterly away."<sup>1</sup>

Triggs ascribes the phenomena to the metamorphosis in Walt during the years 1850-55, during which time he was "absorbed in the contemplation and investigation of the newly revealed world of his being." It was then, Triggs believes, that Walt first discovered his own appetite for life, and first sought to satiate it.

"He gave up all other occupations, under compulsion of a new ideal, and became a solitary seeking in secret some recess in the woods or by the sea that he might jot down with more absolute precision the passing events of his experience."<sup>2</sup>

Nowhere in literature is it possible to find so sustained an expression of lust for experience, nor does another piece of literature afford a display of such rich and intense feeling and perception.

"I lie abstracted and hear beautiful tales  
of things and the reason of things,  
They are so beautiful I nudge myself to listen."<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, venturing a more metaphysical interpretation of what Triggs described, maintains that Whitman's "physical, intellectual, moral, and emotional stature" afforded the poet entrance (or elevation) into an entirely novel realm of experience. It was "a new variety of mental wisdom" which, according to Bucke, admitted Whitman to "a higher state of consciousness". By this is meant that there was added to ordinary self-consciousness a new and higher strata, enveloping in its

1. Oscar L. Triggs, Selections from Prose and Poetry of Walt Whitman, Introd., p.XXVII.

2. Ibid.

scope a knowledge "of life, death, and immortality," which deserved to be called "Cosmic". In many respects these conclusions of Dr. Bucke are related, in spirit, at least, to the transcendentalism of Emerson, and are not, per se, exclusively apropos of Whitman. Bucke's intention to point out the singularity of what he had encountered in the poet's work, however, cannot be mistaken. His findings often indicate that his method of approach to the work was extremely diagnostic, a method no doubt the result of his medical training.

The uniqueness of Whitman's work is very effectively indicated by an excerpt from a German work which Dr. Bucke quotes in his Walt Whitman.<sup>1</sup> The fault in his line of reasoning at this point, illustrated by the selection quoted next, lies in its unnecessary ambiguity and vagueness. Its author's method, like Dr. Bucke's, seems diagnostic, and ascribes its findings about Whitman to what are more or less objective considerations, or to circumstances completely outside the poet and to which he seems unjustly incidental. The work asserts, though its form is interrogative:

"When we listen to the message of those leaves, when we become familiar with the full, sonorous sweep of those rhapsodic utterances rushing upon us with uninterrupted tempo,...and our traditional versification, our forcing into traditional forms of every thought... seems childish. Have we really arrived at the point where life even in poetry demands new modes of express-

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1. Richard Maurice Bucke, Walt Whitman, p.202

ion? Has the present so much to say and of so much importance that the old vessels will not hold the new wine wine? Do we stand before the poetry of the future?"<sup>1</sup>

I hope to have demonstrated that more can be reasonably stated about the effect (in itself) of Whitman's work, than can be explained. Nevertheless a careful examination of what seems to have been the poet's method in gaining the effects that characterize his work, may help to render his meanings more pungent, and what he holds to be truths so profound and forceful, that their very pungency, profundity, and force together will constitute an explanation.

Whitman's work is marked by a unique sort of intensity. Words, phrases, lines, even entire pages may indicate a laxity of tenor, of subject, of expression. But on the other hand, the sensitivity with which the experience is received, the turgency of the emotions and their lack of discipline, the activity and vitality of the convictions and prejudices--all these have a cumulative effect, imparting to the whole a union of feeling. The effect is very unlike--almost the antithesis of--the cause; the whole is different from the parts. Leaves of Grass records not only the significant vitality of existence but also its intensity. By intensity is not meant what is referred to as "appetite" in Whitman. It is not that force which drove him from one facet of life to another, from one companion to another, from one sensation to the

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1. Ibid.

next; but rather is it that quality, not always turbulent but often calm and reposing, which permits us to drink deeply at the springs from which life flows without being overpowered by the potency of the draught. Whitman frequently displays such intensity in Crossing Brooklyn Ferry:

"It is not upon you alone the dark patches  
fall,  
The dark threw patches upon me also;  
The best I had done seemed to me blank and  
suspicious;  
My great thoughts, as I supposed them, were  
they not really meager?  
Would not people laugh at me?...  
I played the part that still looks back on  
the actor or actress,  
The same old role, the role that is what we  
make it, as great as we like,  
Or as small as we like, or both great and  
small."<sup>1</sup>

Here is a narration of life; it can be very confusing.  
The following quotation points out that fact:

"Read this as one does the books that express human life like the Bible--books that have aggregated rather than been written, and one finds these Leaves of Grass grew up in a wonderful manner. The book is very like an opening into a quite new poetic condition."<sup>2</sup>

This is clearly an attempt to reach the core of Whitman, and it is successful insofar as it presents his work as something of a panorama of life. It is, nevertheless, unsatisfactory in that it tries to divorce the phenomena of the Leaves from Whitman himself and ascribe it to "a quite new poetic condition". To illustrate, and incidentally to refute such a contention, may

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1. Whitman, p.195

2. Sara Pollock, The Conservator; Exponent of Whitman, p.30

NOT be cited the fact that there exists a striking similarity between the mood and spirit of certain passages in the Leaves and the exquisite sonnet of John Keats, which ends with the following lines:

"And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love;--then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink."<sup>1</sup>

Particularly striking is the similarity of mood between the sonnet by Keats and the following lines from Walt Whitman:

"You that are to cross from shore to shore  
years hence, are more to me and more in  
my meditation than you might suppose...  
The others that are to follow me, the ties  
between me and them;  
The certainty of others...  
It avails not, neither time nor place--  
Distance avails not."<sup>2</sup>

Certain distinctions must be made in considering the nature of the intensity in Whitman's work. Delineation must be made between mere intensity of emotional expression, and what, for lack of a more adequate term, can be called intensity of spiritual and cosmic expression. The former is not peculiar to Walt Whitman's work; the latter definitely is. Such a cry from the poet as:

"One hour to madness and joy!  
O furious! O confine me not!  
(What is this that frees me so  
in storms?)"<sup>3</sup>

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1. Stephens, Beck, and Snow, English Romantic Poets, p.584  
2. Whitman, p.192  
3. Ibid., p.361



On the other hand, it is fair to say that intensity such as we find in the following passage is singular in Whitman. It bears that peculiar combination of intensity and depth, of pungency and breadth, that mark his work:

"Oh me! Oh life!...Of the questions of  
these recurring;  
What good amid these, O me, O life?  
(Answer)  
That you are here--that life exists and  
identity;  
That the powerful play goes on and you  
may contribute a verse."<sup>1</sup>

In some respects, the intensity of Whitman's verse is indicated by the inevitable attempts of his critics to describe it and to account for its existence. Stuart P. Sherman is very enlightening in these attempts, though his essay on the subject is inclined to favor the obvious "explanation" of the poet. He asserts:

"The vitality and validity of Whitman's report is not that of an experienced observed, but rather that of an experience repeated."<sup>2</sup>

Sherman, then, sees Whitman's intensity as integrally related to the actual experience reported. In a majority of cases this close relationship is recognized; the report by Walt perpetuates the experience as he lived it. It is not a mere verbal shadow of its original self. Boynton sees fit to mention the more than likely correlation between the intensity of the expression and the intensity of the original experience. He writes:

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1. Whitman, p.361

2. Stuart P. Sherman, Americans, p.156

"Whitman...regarded life as a very real succession of vivid, turbulent experiences, and wrote about it in turbulent, vivid terms."<sup>1</sup>

In considering the same phase of the poet's work, a somewhat broader, more generalized, view can be taken. This somewhat general perspective seems the result of regarding Whitman in relation to his environment, and can be very fruitfully (if deftly and subjectively) employed. Norman Foerster used it and concludes that:

"The important thing for a writer is not a certain independence from time and place (~~those~~ factors in experience that brought on pioneering and pragmatism), but a full absorption, like Whitman's, of the vital forces of his own time and place."<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, Foerster gives no further explanation of "full absorption", and in the light of various exceptions taken to his general attitude, the term seems somewhat vague and equivocal.

It is, nevertheless, upon such complex emotional factors as those discussed that the ultimate preservation of the Leaves depends. Certainly much of Whitman ought to live, because of its tremendous ethical significance, that will not. It will not because it lacks this very complex emotional intensity. For though his imagination never failed him, and his great awareness of the drama in human relationships gives depth to his observations, Whitman shows little control over the effective instruments of poetry. The new instrument that he strove to fashion in the book

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1. Percy H. Boynton, More Contemporary Americans, p.201
  2. Norman Foerster, Towards Standards, p.126

that culminated his efforts, taken for what it was intended to be, can never be given more than a qualified approval.

The basic defect of the book lies not in its matter nor in the imaginative spirit pervading that matter, but rather in the imperfect crystalization of the latter in the former. Subjected to the creative imagination of Whitman, this matter undergoes a change, but it is a structural, material change. Of this defect in the Leaves, Gosse says:

"He lay spread abroad in a condition of literary solution. But there he remained, an expanse of crystallizable substances, waiting for the change that never came; rich above all his coevals in the properties of poetry, and yet, for the want of a definite shape and fixity, doomed to sit forever apart from the company of poets."<sup>1</sup>

But that in the Leaves which does remain, will place it among the immortal volumes, for its subject is the great and permanent objects of nature and the great and basic emotions of mankind. These, Whitman felt more keenly than most men. The Leaves will continue to be read only by those who have the intellectual and moral generosity to understand them, but they will continue to be read.

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1. Edmund Gosse, Critical Kit-Kats, p.111

## IMPERFECTIONS

It is to be remembered that the publication of the Leaves of Grass in 1855 did not create as great a literary stir as the present reputation of the volume would lead us to believe. When it did make an appearance in July, Whitman at once took himself to the seclusion of the Long Island hills. He had expected opposition. He knew beforehand that his extravagant novelties would annoy Boston. Indeed, he wished to disturb Boston; he went out of his way to do so. And he succeeded. The Boston Intelligence ascribed the "Song of Myself" to a lunatic. But the really remarkable aspect of the whole thing was that some of the better newspapers and periodicals treated it with respect, if not with approval. Whitman was prepared for practically anything but that, and for the total obliviousness and indifference toward his work of the unlettered public for whose applause he had so ardently hoped. Bailey writes of the poet's disappointment:

"The class which he loved and gloried, his own world of the uneducated, then as ever since, has thought of him, so far as it has ever thought of him at all, sometimes as profane, sometimes as obscene, always as absurd. The class that he understood has never understood him. The class which he has never understood has in a good many instances vindicated the culture he despised, by showing that by that very culture it has been enabled to perceive what has rarely been perceived by the class to which it was addressed by him, the essential poetry which lay in his work so often concealed under a surface of vulgarity and absurdity."<sup>1</sup>

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1. John Bailey, Walt Whitman, 1926, p.22

Whitman's use of the famous letter from Emerson is well known. Whatever can be said of the right of "the good grey poet" to attach the epistle of the Boston Brahmin to the second edition of the Leaves, this much is certain. That Emerson's encouraging words were utilized in a way not intended by their author: that Whitman well realized his abuse of the elder man's encouragement, and published the letter with that knowledge: that Emerson was greatly displeased, and voiced his displeasure soon after the second edition was brought to his attention. The tone, the intention, of the man whom Whitman was later to address as "Dear Master" is nowhere clearer than it is in the text of his note to Whitman:

"I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of the Leaves of Grass. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet produced. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy...I give you the joy of your brave and free thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well. I greet you at the beginning of a great career."<sup>1</sup>

Emerson had recognized genius, and was one of the first to hail Whitman as a bard of great promise. His diction, he pointed out, "when on its good behavior is copious and strong, full of surprises, utilizing the brave, homely words of the people." And Whitman, for all his rugged independence, had succumbed to the strength and charm of the Concord sage. The time was to come when Whitman would resent, with not uncharacteristic caprice, that this had been so true. The role of disciple he might have

1. Quoted in J.J.Chapman, Chapters in Emerson and Other Essays, p. 187

accepted, however distasteful it was, but he would not, if he could prevent it, have that role imputed to him. This is not difficult to understand. It is difficult, though, to exonerate the display of ingratitude, of pettiness and shallowness, that he was to display during the eighties, when he deigned to admit that he had had "a touch of Emerson on the brain--though it came late, and then only on the surface," and that "for a month or so he had thought of Emerson as a master.

As to this matter his apologists take a number of stands. Some state that at these times "Whitman is not at his strongest and sweetest." Others, hardly more plausible even if somewhat more systematic in accounting for their hero's peccadillios, point out the "Do I contradict myself? Vey well then, I contradict myself" attitude. There can be no doubt, though, that Walt was more than a youngster in 1855, and even when he could write impatiently to W.S.Kennedy that, unimportant as it was whether or not he had read Emerson, "the fact happens to be positively that I had not." Newton Arvin contradicts this statement of "the good, grey poet":

"The fact 'happens' to be, if not positively then almost irresistibly, that he had, and a truer as well as a more admirable side of his nature had revealed itself when, during the war times, he freely admitted to J.T. Trowbridge that Emerson had helped him 'to find himself' in a way that made his book possible: 'I was simmering, simmering, simmering,' he said, 'Emerson brought me to a boil.' Certainly it would have been a feat, even with less omnivorousness than Whitman's, if in the forties and early fifties he had managed to remain deaf not only to the great fame and reknown of Emerson, but to the

basis for it."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Bucke is one of Whitman's strongest protagonists. Yet he dealt him an irreparable blow when, as one of the poet's literary executors, he unearthed the scrap affixed to a magazine article of 1847, in which Whitman observes that Emerson "pierces the crusts that envelope the secrets of life," that he "joins on equal terms the few great sages and original seers," and that "his words shed light to the best souls; they do not admit of argument."<sup>2</sup>

It is from instances of this kind, not infrequent in the annals of "the good grey poet" that our doubts are born and we question the virtues that many of his "disciples" ascribe so unreservedly to him. Unfortunately, many times we discover that much that is impressive in Whitman is mere showmanship, and anything more probing than a perfunctory examination of the man brings to mind a remark made about him by Stuart P. Sherman, which was something to the effect that a serpent in a showcase is a serpent still.

By "more than a perfunctory examination" of Whitman, we mean a casting aside of a vast amount of furtiveness, dullness, sliminess or downright misinterpretation which some commentaries on Whitman contain. Such an examination can show us a very great deal. It can illustrate and account for many of the marks of Whitman's style; it can throw light upon his sociological theor-

1. Newton Arvin, Whitman, 1938, p.188

2. Richard Maurice Bucke, Walt Whitman, 1883, p.167

ies; most important of all, so far as we are concerned, it can once and for all silence the recurrent question as to why Whitman, who desired above all else to be a folk poet, has never been accepted by the folk.

The secret is, after all, hardly a secret; or rather, it is an open secret, which is the worst variety of all. It is of that variety which leads to whisperings and snickers, and which prevents the personality or the topic in question from being rationally discussed. But in regard to his utter lack of reception by the class to which he tried so desperately to appeal one can find the reason without much difficulty once the miasma that beclouds Whitman's work and the discussions of him has been swept away.

For he was a homosexual, nor has there ever been good reason to doubt it. Considering their place and time, the "Calamus" poems are of an ~~amazing~~ frankness. It is well known that the frequently encountered tale of the New Orleans lady and her children by him was a myth, invented by Whitman as an escape or a defence. This is natural enough, since social groups have always demanded certain norms, not only of behavior but of constitution. It is therefore puzzling that so many critics have accepted these yarns at their face value.

When Whitman's English friend and admirer, J.A.Symonds, first read "Calamus" he encountered several passages which he hesitated to comprehend with too much finality. He wrote to



Whitman and asked for elucidation and Whitman replied in a very frank vein concerning his past sexual contacts with women:

"My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc have been jolly bodily, and doubtless open to criticism. Though unmarried I have had six children--two are dead --one living Southern grandchild, fine boy, writes to me occasionally--circumstances (connected with their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations."<sup>1</sup>

Even at this time, when the letter to Symonds was made public, most of the poet's friends refused to believe its implications, logically assuming that the old man was fabricating. Others, however, continued to believe that Walt was the father of children, and some narrated a recollection of a visit to the poet, in his old age, by a grandson. Any doubt that did exist, nevertheless, was quite conclusively exploded by the publication of the letters to Peter Doyle in 1897. It seems quite apparent that these letters speak for themselves, even in lieu of any other evidence. Whitman frankly announces that "Calamus" proceeds "in paths untrodden" in being songs ~~so~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~manly~~ attachment". He is as explicit in the matter as he can possibly be without reverting to utter obscenity.

The "Calamus" poems contain the homosexual's atavistic subconscious memories of the "men's houses" in primitive societies projected upon the present social structure and his hopes for it, which are profoundly mingled with socialistic ideology:

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1. Published by Edward Carpenter in the London Reformer, February 1902. The article now forms a chapter of Carpenter's Days with Walt Whitman, 1906, and is partially quoted here in Perry's Walt Whitman, 1906, p.45

"I believe the main purport of these states is to found a superb friendship, exalted, previously unknown...waiting latent in all men." The "Calamus" poems contain the usual symbols and subterfuges as well as idealistic-sounding but nevertheless homo-erotic outcries. To even the unsophisticated, the one poem, "Whoever You are Holding me now in Hand," leaves no doubt as to Whitman's libidinous nature and practices.

Even an acceptance of the Peter Doyle association in the naivest manner imaginable--as simply the attraction of one indolent, good-natured, youthful adult for another, two people linked by a mutual enjoyment of eating watermelon on the busy thoroughfares of Washington while they gaped at the passing crowds and the crowds gaped back at them--the tone, the phraseology of their correspondence is almost sickening. If it was instinctive in Whitman to address a big, grown-up Irishman as "Dear Baby," and "Dearest Boy," it was also mawkish and effeminate.

It hardly suffices for Whitman's apologists to liken the erotic lines--the eighty, for example, that O'Connor pointed out as "objectionable"--to the "accidental opening of the wrong dressing-room door." One is more than "amused, embarrassed, disenchanted, or disinterested"; one is too frequently disgusted and revolted, not necessarily morally but aesthetically and temperamentally. Even the mildest paternal censorship would keep the Leaves from where Whitman hoped it would go--into the home and to the fireside.

And even if the "Calamus" poems are not representative of any particular phase of Whitman's nature, even if one is willing to regard them as indiscreet efforts on the part of the poet to shock his reader---one of his defenders on this score said, "Surely it is no worse to spoil a poem in order to shock Mrs. Grundy than it is to spoil a poem in order not to shock her"---the positive effect remains, unmistakable and unpleasant. One illustration from "Calamus" should suffice:

"Passing stranger! You do not know how long-  
ingly I look upon you,  
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was  
seeking, (it comes to me as of a dream)  
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy  
with you,  
All is recall'd as we flit by each other, fluid,  
affectionate, chaste, matured,  
You grew up with me, were a boy with me or a  
girl with me,  
I ate with you and slept with you, your body  
has become not yours only not left my body  
mine only,  
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face,  
flesh, as we pass, you take of my beard,  
breast, hands, in return."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, even to his apologists it must be clear that if Whitman is in this respect sinned against, the blame for the misjudgement can be placed upon Walt's tendency to play with fire, both in the language he uses and the subjects he treats. For he could not have been ignorant of the fact, being himself a sensual man, that sensual men inevitably give to the words and deeds of others the explanation that would be true were they their own.

1. Whitman, Leave of Grass, p.63

It is unlikely that the ordinary reader would construe the passages of "Calamus" in the way that W.S.Kennedy did when he called them "the ethical perfume of the noblest utterances of friendship."

Though there may nothing in Whitman suggestive of what he called "the sly settee and the adulterous, unwholesome couple" it cannot be denied that he is offensive. To Whitman, modesty and reserve were negative, not positive, qualities. "If I cut sex out," he once said, "I might just as well cut everything out of my work." On that point he remained adamant; not even Emerson could sway him. And for choosing to remain what he was, or for choosing to appear something that he was not, he pays the price--rejection by those to whose bosom he wished to be taken. He is more than a little repellant; one cannot take genuine pleasure even in his accounts of the work he did as a nurse and wound dresser during the war. There is too much attitudinizing and embracing. No wonder that the guardians of Horace Traubel's youth warned him against "that lecherous old man." There spoke the voice of the people.

The factor of Whitman's form in the Leaves of Grass is of great importance in accounting for the lack of popular absorption of his poetry. Of the few people who read the first editions of the Leaves, it is not likely that many read the preface--a ten page essay set in double columns. Yet the book is hardly to be understood without it. He brings all things to bear

upon the individuality of character. The "Art of Arts" is simplicity. Thus the great poet is marked by unconstraint and defiance of precedent. He sees that the soul is as great as anything outside of it; that there is no natural antagonism between poetry and science, or between the natural and the supernatural, everything being miraculous and divine.

The Leaves were in no sense impromptu. In purpose and in close attention to the theory of poetic style they were the result of deliberate and purposive planning. Whitman did, however, hold certain ideas about originality. Among his "Rules for Composition" he mentions:

"A perfectly transparent plate-glassy style, artless, with no ornaments or attempts at ornaments for their own sake....Take no illustrations whatever from the ancients or classics...nor from the royal and aristocratic forms of Europe. Make no mention or allusion whatever to them, except as they relate to the new present things--to our country--to American character or interests." <sup>1</sup>

The reading public could not have been more surprised by the contents of the Leaves, therefore, than it was by the eccentricities of its form. The wide pages of the 1855 quarto gave Whitman's long lines a dignity unapproached in any subsequent edition. Yet many of the lines were obviously prose, containing no hint of poetry. There was no use of stanza or rhyme. There was no uniformly recognizable type of metre, although many passages fell into regular metrical beats. The raw material had

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1. Whitman, Prose, p.347

been flung in with a liberal hand--emotion, imagination, words, and phrases.

In a striking self-criticism, Whitman declared:

"He dismisses without ceremony all the orthodox accoutrements, tropes, verbal haberdashery, 'feet', and the entire stock-in-trade of rhyme-talking heroes and heroines and all the lovesick plots of customary poetry, and constructs his verse in a loose and free metre of his own, of an irregular length of lines, apparently lawless at first perusal, although on closer examination a certain regularity appears, like the recurrence of lesser and larger waves on the seashore, rolling in without intermission, and fitfully rising and falling." <sup>1</sup>

This, then, was true poetic doctrine after Whitman's own heart, and it was even less acceptable to the New England Transcendentalists than it is today. The Leaves is a hybrid, and possesses something of the hybrid's exotic and strange charm. But it was not for the "folk;" they would have none of it.

Lewisohn accounts for their rejection of the Leaves:

"Wherever the folk sings, whether in Negro spiritual or in Cowboy ballad or in sailor chantey or in Old-World folksong, it sings in time. Note the scientific precision of common speech. It sings in time and its pleasure is derived from the heightened consciousness of time which can be gained only by dividing time, beating time, or, in other words, by creating rhythm." <sup>2</sup>

There is no occasion here to inquire into the origin and sources of Whitman's form. Ossian, the supposed lawlessness of classical Hebrew poetry, blank verse, the experiments of Southey and Shelley, all or any of these would suffice to justify Whitman's impatience with the discipline of verse; but the poetic

1. Whitman, Prose, p. 365

2. Lewisohn, Expression in America, p.202

instrument he adopted was, of all conceivable forms, the least calculated "to teach the average man the glory of his daily walk and trade." The reason is obvious. Such form would be the last to reach the average man, and he would be the last to understand it or its message.

The "folk" do not object to raising a fallen hero and taking him to their bosoms. There are few "lily-whites" among those whom the people have "fondly absorbed." There are few who prefer Galahad to Launcelot. But the "folk" must themselves understand the weaknesses that claim their hero. Almost any vice save ingratitude they can overlook, but too many ~~XXXXXX~~ phases of Whitman's life revealed some obligation overlooked, some kindness gone unthanked. The behavior of the people's poet may be erratic to any degree, but it must not be erotic. Above all, the people's poet must address them in language compensating with beauty for what it lacks in clarity. So far as popular acceptance is concerned, even the optimism of Walt Whitman could not disregard the obstacles that he had placed upon his own path.

THE INFINITE I

At one time the belief was common that one had to be a supreme egotist in order fully to understand Walt Whitman, or to comprehend the message that seemed to be the most valuable feature of his literary composition. Perhaps that belief was nearer correctness than any subsequent modification of it could be, and yet there are a number of splendid treatments of Whitman by men whose work could not mark them as egotists. Moreover, the work of these commentators has altered the general view to the point where it is generally accepted that a clarification of the Whitman "feeling" is a much greater rarity than is a manifestation of the feeling itself. The poet has stated:

"I cannot say to any person what I hear--  
I cannot say it to myself-- it is very  
wonderful." 1

This passage's meaning is not singular in Whitman; it frequently recurs in the Leaves. Of its many implications, one is perhaps outstanding for the possible solution it offers as to why Whitman is even today so narrowly read. The poet was fully

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1. Whitman, Leaves, p.37



aware of his own inaccessibility, and the lack of popular acclaim given the Leaves in 1855 probably both disappointed and surprised him. There is reason to believe, however, that he was spiritually fortified for any disappointment over the reception of the Leaves. That reason is illustrated in the conviction Whitman expresses in the following lines:

"One world is aware, and by far the largest to me,  
and that is myself;  
And whether I come to my own today, or in ten  
thousand or ten million years,  
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheer-  
fulness I can wait." <sup>1</sup>

It is rather difficult, in many instances impossible, fully to understand Whitman's explanation of this patience. Even more difficult is the complete acceptance of the poet's apology. Yet to know and to understand Whitman entails an understanding and acceptance of his attitude toward popular acceptance. This last, in turn, involves an understanding of his basic "themes".

The note most deeply and resonantly sounded by Whitman, the element that is most (perhaps entirely) responsible for the existence of those works and the nature of them, the very blood of that vibrant and personable literature, is an awareness of and a rejoicing in Personal Existence. In almost every line of the Leaves can be found evidence of experience, vital and pulsing with the urge and surge of life.

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1. Ibid., p.50

"...the first step pleased me so much,  
The mere face, consciousness-- these forms,  
the power of motion,  
The least insect or animal -- the senses --eye-  
sight -- love;  
The first step, I say, aw'd me and pleased me so  
much,  
I have hardly gone, and hardly wished to go,  
any farther,  
But stop and loiter all the time, to sing it  
in extatic songs." 1

From the first appearance of Whitman's work this quality was recognized. The first review of the Leaves <sup>2</sup> made mention of "an original perception of nature,...a manly brawn,...an epic directness" in the poet. Under the general heading of "epic directness" can be included many characteristics accurately ascribed to Whitman under an assortment of titles and terms. Many of the characteristics, literary and otherwise, intended as a "key" to Whitman, actually are subordinate to and have their source in the epic directness that Walt assumed toward his readers. Stuart Sherman said of Whitman:

"He lives because he marvelously well identified that daimonic personality of his with his book, so that whoever touches it, as he himself declared, touches a man, and a man of singularly intense perceptiveness." 2

The poet very frequently and painstakingly differentiated between the relationship he desired to establish with his readers, and the relationship maintained with their readers by other writers. The latter he addresses in proclaiming his purpose and his method.

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1. Ibid., p.11

2. Putnam's Monthly, VI., Sept., 1855, p.321-323

"You who have celebrated by-gones!  
Who have explored the outward, the surfaces  
of the races -- the life that has exhibited  
itself;  
I, habitan of the Alleghanies, treating of him  
as he is in his own rights, as he is in him-  
self,  
Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom  
exhibited itself, (the great pride of man in  
himself)." 1

This intimacy between the man and his fellowmen,  
between the poet and each of his readers, as described by Whit-  
man himself in the preceding excerpt, must exist if Whitman's  
real worth is to exist. The effect of Whitman depends utterly  
upon the existence and the endurance of the connection between  
him and his athletes; there is no virility, no profundity, with-  
out it. Where there does not exist, between the poet and his  
readers, a mutual and pungent recognition -- not a mere mutual  
foreknowledge -- then the most valuable and vital quality of the  
association is lost. The feeling of vitality is necessary be-  
tween them; cold cognizance does not suffice.

"All I mark as my own, you shall offset it  
with your own,  
Else it were time lost listening to me." 2

Whitman's utter faith in the omniportance of the in-  
dividual spirit, and in the ultimate unity between all men, re-  
gardless of time or circumstance that may separate them, must be  
understood in order that his message to those "yet to come" be  
understood.

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1. Whitman, p.10
2. Ibid., p.49

"It avails not-- neither time nor place --  
distance avails not;  
I am with you, you men and women of a gener-  
ation, or ever so many generations hence;  
I project myself -- also I return -- I am with  
you and know how it is." 1

These are not cryptic utterances, mouthings calculated to endure on the strength of their morbidity. Neither are they the self-contained and static progeny of minds that had contemplated us, but which felt no real assurance of our eventual existence. Whitman knew of our coming, knew "how it is." The certainty of his knowledge is imparted to us by his words; it is an integral part of the bond, the "connection" between us.

"Full of life, now, compact, visible,  
I,...to one of a century hence, or any  
number of centuries hence,  
To you, yet unborn, these, seeking you.

When you read these, I, that was visible,  
am become invisible;  
Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing  
my poems, seeking me;  
Fancying how happy you were, if I could be  
with you, and become your comrade;  
Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too  
certain but I am with you now.)" 2

Perhaps it is obvious from this that Whitman's awareness of his own "Being," his own individual vitality, did actually account for his assurance of the infinity of the spirit, and enabled him to announce so confidently:

"See, projected, through time,  
For me, an audience interminable." 3

Oscar Lovell Triggs has this to say on the subject:

no "Such utterance is not wholly new in literature. Immortality has been held a dogma for many centuries. Evil has been pronounced null, and love declared to be universal. But Whitman differs from all others in the certainty of his knowledge. He does not speculate about love and death. He knows he is an immortal soul. His surety is grounded in certainty." 1

The explanation, the basis of the "connection between Whitman and his reader -- his audience interminable" is his assurance that "I am with you and know how it is." This is the utterance not merely of a poet and preacher, but of a comrade; what it offers is encouragement, not warning or advice. As to the function, the purpose, of the directness of Whitman in addressing his audience, Stuart Sherman has this to say:

"Why is this directness important to us? Open the Leaves and you will find this piquantly intimate answer: 'I considered long and seriously of you before you were born.' Other poets have given little thought to us, and we, in compensation, give little thought to them;...Whitman, proclaimer of egotism, foresaw our intentness on our own enterprises, and prepared for the day when we should demand of him: 'What have you said, Poet, that concerns us?' Though he is saturated with historical and contemporary references, nothing in him is merely contemporary, merely historical. He gathers up ages, literatures, philosophies, and consumes them as the food of passion and prophecy." 2

Whitman's province was not only the future but the present as well. Even that is a serious understatement, for actually his great "certainty" in the future was a result of his recognition and awareness of the present. The present was the source of his vital power; perhaps his most potent quality was his

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1. Triggs, Selections from Prose and Poetry of Walt Whitman, p.39  
2. Sherman, Americans, p.158

grasp of the present, his fearless and comprehensive dealing with reality. Earth, "the eloquent, dumb, great mother" is not old, has lost none of the fresh and youthful charm, none of the divine and beautiful meanings that are hers. She still bears great sons and daughters, if only they would assert themselves and realize their birthright -- a richer, not a poorer, heritage than was ever before provided.

To the poet of the Individual, the very essence of greatness and goodness is an awareness of one's own consciousness and existence. To feel life within one's self, regardless of how pleasant or unpleasant life's manifestations may be, is a blessing. The spirit that recognizes its own marvelous power can know no real pain. In the Leaves Whitman says:

"Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with  
joy;  
Oh the joy of suffering,  
To struggle against great odds, to meet enemies  
undaunted,  
To be entirely alone with them -- to find how much  
one can stand." 1

This cannot be called a mere philosophy of optimism, for optimism is only relative, manifesting itself only when projected against a contrasting background. In Whitman's theme of the Individual there is no contrast, there can be no pessimism. His philosophy does not even consider the twists and foibles of a kind or cruel fate, of friendly or unfriendly circumstances. The Individual, so long as he "knows" his soul, so long as he can

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say and mean "I Am!" need take no cognizance of anything else. All except himself is superficial and unimportant.

It is clear that Whitman's second basic theme, which is to be discussed separately, is a natural extension or outgrowth of the theme of the Individual. The Democracy envisioned by Whitman is a democracy within individuals as well as of individuals. The former is, paradoxically enough, both the means and the end of Whitman's philosophy. In exhorting the equality of man within himself, in championing the individual to be an individual, Whitman is seldom embarrassed. It is only when his "Democracy" assumes material, political, sociological proportions that he finds pitfalls to engulf him.

In calling upon men to recognize their basic equality Whitman is perfectly confident and logically sound. He says:

"Whoever you are! Claim your own at any hazard!  
These shows of the east and west are tame, compared to you;  
These immense meadows -- these interminable rivers--  
You are immense and interminable as they!" <sup>1</sup>

To Whitman, man's only weakness lies in his own mistrust and want of hope. It is not sufficient to be confident only in the species; there must also be confidence in one's self. After all, the fate of the species lies primarily and unescapably in the hands of the individuals that compose it. To be confident in the continuity and indestructibility of the species, without being equally confident of the individual's ability to preserve and continue it, is highly illogical. And where, among

individuals, must we look first for this confidence? In ourselves. That is the purport of Whitman's cry. The testimony as to our fitness, our self-justification in living, must be a sincere and profound testimony, and not merely a superficial mouthing. That confidence can be procured from no source other than our own soul, a recognition of the fact that we have one. That recognition dispels and doubts as to our adequacy. The poet proclaims, in "Salut au Monde":

"Each of us inevitable; each of us limitless;  
Wach of us with his or her own right upon the  
earth;  
Each of us allowed the eternal purport of the  
earth;  
Each of us here as divinely as any are here." <sup>1</sup>

Whitman was to himself a Cosmos; his own vitality was the only thing of which he was certain. All else was a shifting, deluding, inconsequential veil that served only to rob the individual of his greatest and only birthright -- his self-recognition. In the largest sense, human life on earth to Whitman represented only a phase in the ultimate destiny of individuals. He holds that the human spirit attains through its apparent subjection to the physical world, the differentiation, the indentity which gives it its essential value. Under such subjection it becomes a person. In its reaction to these influences it preserves or destroys itself.

Much more cannot be said about Whitman's recognition of

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the Individual, in and by itself, without encroachment upon his concept of the Democracy. It should be remembered that there is no theoretical conflict between the two, except when each is considered in its most obvious connotation. Though Whitman always insisted more emphatically upon the idea of the individual than upon its antithesis, he frequently, as in the preceding passages, revealed how acutely conscious he was of "the falsity of a monolithic individualism." This impression frequently becomes apparent in the pages of Democratic Vistas.

"Not that half only, individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness or love, fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades and men brothers." <sup>1</sup>

How closely these two themes -- that of the individual and that of Democracy -- run at times, is often suggested, not only by the spirit of his verse, but also by the text of Whitman in prose. Soon after the passage quoted from the Vistas he wrote:

"The liberalist of today has this advantage over antique or medieval times, that his doctrine seeks not only to individualize but to universalize. The great work Solidarity has arisen." <sup>2</sup>

His words here have a mighty application.

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1. Whitman, Democratic Vistas, p.486

2. Ibid., p.486

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As it was impossible for Alexander Pope to enter the garden of his house at Twickenham, without first traversing a dark subterraneous passage, so it is impossible to discourse upon the nature of Whitman's "Democracy" theme, without first recognizing and treating of a controversy which that theme seems inevitably to precipitate. The will-o-the-wisp nature of this question becomes evident as soon as is revealed that it involves what appears to be a "consistency" or an "inconsistency" in Whitman. When the argument is shown to hinge upon either of these concepts, neither faction has difficulty in drawing upon philosophic-literary arsenals at which they can gird themselves for the struggle. An attitude such as Whitman himself expresses in, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself," or the position of Emerson in Self-Reliance, proves a tower of strength on the one hand, while on the other lies ready the immense resources of traditional standard and criteria. As usual, in questions of this kind, there is seldom held by either faction any hope of conclusively proving Yea or Nay. What value the ar-

gument does contain, however, lies in the possibility of there emerging from it an enlightening precipitant -- a by-product that is neutral, so far as the question at hand is concerned, but which may show the way to a more intelligent and comprehensive perspective of the entire question.

It is necessary that the dominant theme in Whitman -- his proclamation of the vital significance of the Individual -- be set down in considerable detail. It is the "key" not only to Whitman's concept of the Individual, but the link between that concept and the vision of the Democracy. In some respects it is a part of the latter.

The equality that Whitman espouses in the heralding of his Democratic vision is not the "incredible" equality of the philosophes, though anything less than a painstaking scrutiny of his work will give such a fallacious impression. His is the equality of "common work and common living in a society from which arbitrary distinctions and the privileges of caste and fortune" have been systematically and thoroughly removed. As has been previously mentioned, Whitman's particular aptness and capacity for such a practical sentiment is considerably explained by his background and special genius. His birth and upbringing enabled him to be more than the lyricist of such a Democracy. The Leaves celebrates Democracy not only as a vision and an ideal, but as a "plastic actuality." It depicts a series of "ordinary" men and women in the very acts of constructing, loving, talking,

fearing, sinning, singing, to an extent where this drama arouses emotions different from those aroused by the words of any other poet of the century, an emotion that Walt himself felt and which he considered an integral part of the "Vista".

He states:

"As Democracy and Science in the Modern (World) have an entire lack of what in Greece and Rome was furnished by reverence for the Gods...or, under the feudal ages by loyalty, deference, caste, now unknown -- the future must substitute it by a feeling now new, a profound and tender enthusiasm for the people, and especially for the poorer and less favored and educated masses." 1

It was towards the development of such a feeling that the Leaves contributed so generously. The contribution is so spontaneous as to lift itself, almost by its own bootstraps, above the sublunary atmosphere that often surrounds the person of the poet. This feeling is not a mere compassion for the unfortunate; that is scarcely present at all. Whitman does less to encourage sympathy for the unfortunate than he does to make articulate the "great pride of man in himself." Here the primal theme merges with the secondary. "Whoever degrades anyone degrades me," he wrote, as Arvin puts it, "in one of his moments of greatest insight."

The equality, then, of Whitman's Democracy is seen perhaps as it was intended to be seen -- the equal consciousness on the part of all men of the dignity, the distinction, the irreducible value of Individual Being, of everyman's Being, whoever he

1. Whitman, Democratic Vistas, quoted in Arvin, p.263

may be.

"You Hottentot with clicking palate! you  
wooly-haired hordes!  
You own'd persons dropping sweat-drops or  
blood-drops!  
You human forms with the fathomless ever-  
impressive countenance of brutes!  
You poor Kooboo whom the meanest of the rest look  
look down upon for all your glimmering language  
and spirituality!" 1

And so he lists them all, from "You son and daughter  
of England," to "You benighted roamer of Amazonia! You Patago-  
nian! You Feejee-man!" Concluding, summarizing with the ess-  
ence, so often repeated, of the "Salut au Monde":

But each phase of the Vista is not as unconfined, as  
irreproachably unprejudiced, as is this phase of individual equa-  
lity. Whitman unquestionably conceived a "nationalistic" vision.  
Here his perspective is less broad, his sympathies less universal,  
than they are in the former. It is from these appearances that  
the controversy arises. Does Whitman, in assuming a "national-  
istic" ideal, betray the universal liberality that marks the  
most significant single feature of his work? Generally, there  
seem to be two opinions on the matter. A statement by Edmund  
C. Stedman illustrates one of them:

"Thus we come to a defect in Whitman's theories, rea-  
soning, and general attitude. He professes universality,  
absolute sympathy, breadth in morals, thought, workmanship,  
...exemption from prejudice and formalism. I half suspect  
that his faults lie in the region where, to use his own  
word, he is most complacent: in brief, that a certain nar-  
rowness holds him within well defined bounds. In many ways

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he does not conform to his creed." 1

Perhaps characteristic of Stedman's general position is the sense and logic of the component parts to which it can be reduced. The only demand he makes is that the reader accept his statement that, "Whitman's...spirit of his whole work refutes certain statements of his feeling." Apart from that, his statement is as logical as a geometric hypothesis.

Illustrative of the second type of reasoning on the subject of Whitman's consistency is Stuart Sherman's opinion:

"There is at least an appearance of inconsistency between this limitless humanitarian sympathy of Whitman's and his enthusiastic nationalism. There is at least an appearance of inconsistency between his enthusiastic nationalism and his resolute individualism. But let us not forget the appearance of fundamental conflict between the multitude of the heavenly host crying peace on earth and the words of him they heralded saying, 'I come not to bring peace but a sword.' The exploration of the grounds between these opposites, the reconciliation between jarring antimonies, is a task from which statesmen shrink. It is precisely the task of the poetic and religious imagination. Whitman recognized it as the very heart of his theme." 2

As far as the first two sentences above are concerned, one must concur with Mr. Stedman: The beginning of the third sentence marks a possible point of departure. In contrast to the level at which Mr. Stedman's position advances, Sherman's level is almost transcendental, and on it he would strip even inconsistency of the qualities generally imparted to it by the minds of men. He defends his complex and elevated position by referring to the mystery that surrounded Whitman himself. This much is

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1. Edmund C. Stedman, Poets of America, p.384

2. Stuart Sherman, Americans, p.164

fair. If the concept is deserving of preservation, we should not begin by explaining away its essence. Sherman apparently is content to let it remain a perplexity, so long as it remains. He says:

"There is the mystery which enchanted him and which perplexes us still -- the mystery of the co-existence of personal freedom with social authority. He believed in both, just as for centuries men have believed in the coexistence of free will with fore-knowledge absolute." <sup>1</sup>

So much for a demonstration of the two positions, and the direction of the implications of both. But there is an emergent from this controversy, a by-product far more valuable to an understanding of Whitman than is anything contained in the arguments themselves. To describe briefly this emergent is to indicate the point at which the two divergent lines of argument meet and fuse. Stedman believes that Whitman "in many places does not conform to his creed." Sherman prefers to regard these non-conformities merely as the "appearances" of inconsistency, which, as such, are integral factors of any profundity to which man can justly make claim. Both Stedman and Sherman, however, take into consideration "the spirit of Whitman's whole work."

The former asserts that "Whitman's...spirit of his whole work refutes certain statements of his feeling," while the latter declares:

"No one has a right to call his reconciliation of the Individual with society inadequate who has not taken the trouble to hear the whole of his song and its commentaries

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1. Ibid., p.165

in 'Democratic Vistas' and 'Specimen Days'; for part support part, and the whole is greater than the sum of them." <sup>1</sup>

It is there, in the agreement that the core, the crux, of Whitman's work is not some particular item to be detected by a close and rigid analysis of the whole but rather is something commensurate with and inherent in that Whole, that the otherwise divergent views are reconciled. As the seismologist is apprised of the center of an earth-disturbance by the intersecting of lines extended from points where the disturbances have been felt, so we can regard this intersection point as indicative, at least, of the source of the power of Whitman's work.

There are a number of outstanding factors in the Whitman concept of Democracy. Just what they are, or, rather, what they should most properly be called, appears to be a matter of conjecture. Whitman offers impressions, rather than objects. He never states his opinion other than suggestively, obliquely. Unless one takes it upon himself to read into Whitman a great deal that is not actually there, the Concept of the poet cannot be examined otherwise than generally.

One factor entering into the concept, however, is that of size, of immensity. Whitman's songs are replete with evidence of the fact that to him breadth and mass were an integral part of the Democratic vista. There appear in the first twelve lines of "American Feuillage" (and these lines were selected for examination at random) the following terms:

1. Ibid., p.165



"vast slope drained by the Southern Sea"  
"three and a half millions of square miles"  
"eighteen thousand miles of sea-coast"  
"thirty thousand miles of rivers"  
"seven millions of distinct families, and the same  
number of houses"

The implications of such figures as these -- the enormity that they represented -- intrigued Walt. To him it seemed that such an immensity necessarily involved a perfection. This perfect, gargantuan thing was America. He had travelled for days on end through a single of its rivers and had not seen more than a half its length. He had let his eye wander over the tall wheat and corn of the western country until his eyes ached with the extent of the golden vision. It was such as this that impressed him, and this impression that he sought to convey in the "new and gigantic" literature of the States. No doubt it was this quality in the Leaves and in Democratic Vistas that led Carlyle to state, when asked his opinion of Whitman, "His attitude seems to be, 'I'm a big man because I live in a big country'." There is a certain amount of truth in Carlyle's statement, though it has been innumerable times pointed out that it does Whitman an injustice.

It is almost impossible to read Whitman discerningly and understandingly without feeling the extent of this influence of size upon him. Indeed, this influence is so manifest that to deny its potency is to dispute Whitman's impressionable nature

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and America's impressiveness. In his youth he had marked and evidently had been wondrously effected by the sea, hills, and valleys of Paumanok. Even greater was the effect upon him of the unending prairies, the towering mountains, the interminable rivers that he had seen in the course of his journey to New Orleans. The proportions of these landmarks he naturally enough regarded as a characteristic of the land, and consequently of himself. He echoes these vast concepts when he speaks.

The significance of the colossal breadth and girth of Democracy to Whitman is neither increased nor decreased by its affiliation with another factor -- that of personality. Personality, per se, would appear justly to be inextricably bound with what we have previously discussed as Whitman's basic idea. In that connotation, however, personality is regarded by Whitman as an aspect of an individual complete within himself. As a factor of the Democracy concept, personality, while distinctive enough, appears to be a by-product of the American, the Democratic, type. Whitman says, "I shall use the words 'America' and 'Democracy' as convertible terms." <sup>1</sup>

Anyone regarding the Democratic "Vista" as an ideal will perceive this concept of personality in terms of imaginative idealism. Whoever regards the vista as an actuality, or a potential actuality, something about him and under his feet, will consider this concept of personality as vital, pungent, indispen-

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1. Whitman, Democratic Vistas, p.302

sible. It is personality made flexible by its separation from a definite and tangible body. Hence its elusiveness is compensated for by its omnipresence and the pungency of its revelations. We have the body of Democracy, the material America, the soil, sky, homes, and men that comprise it, but along with these in Whitman we find -- hovering near and enveloping the body -- the spirit and personality of Democracy.

These are not always compatible. There are times when the material America is too crass for the spiritual; there are times when the latter seems too ephemeral, too elusive and delicate, for the former. Whitman is cognizant of that fact. In indignation he upbraids material America, venting his wrath on whatever he holds responsible for the shortcomings.

"Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believed in (for all this hectic glow, and all these melodramatic screamings), nor is humanity itself believed in. The spectacle is appalling." <sup>1</sup>

Nor is the poet content with such generality of illustration. His sharp and active senses are accosted by objects that seem vile, unfit for the democracy as he had conceived it. He must give vent to his indignation and does:

"<sup>f</sup>Coness that everywhere, in shop, street, church, theatre, bar-room, official chair, are pervading flippancy, vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity -- everywhere the gay, puny, impudent, foolish, prematurely ripe -- everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female,  
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painted, padded, dyed, chignoned, muddy complexions, bad blood....with a range of manners (considering the advantages enjoyed), probably the meanest to be seen in the entire world." 1

Pessimism like this, however, does not long remain with Walt. The grounds justifying it appear before him and for a time seem insurmountable obstacles to his concept's realization but they disappear before the larger faith. He expresses his confidence in the fulfillment of the "prophecy":

"In the full conception of these facts and points, and all that they infer, pro and con -- yet with unshaken faith in the elements that make up the American masses, the composites, of both sexes, and even considered as individuals -- and ever recognizing in them the broadest bases of the best literary and aesthetic appreciation -- I proceed with my speculation, Vistas." 2

Many illustrations are available of Whitman's attempts to convey poetically the personality of the Democratic concept, the Vista. In one instance these attempts may take the form of a terse but enlightening phrase; another may present a specific fact, an object which, no matter how trivial or slight in itself remains an item of the poet's concept. Always, though, must be carried in mind that "no other author presents himself so inadequately in fragments".

"Singing the song of These, my ever-united lands --  
my body no more inevitably united, part to part,  
and made one identity, any more than my lands  
are inevitably united, and made one Identity;  
Nativities, climates, the grass of great Pastoral  
Plains;  
Cities, labors, death, animals, products, war, good  
and evil -- these me,

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1. Ibid, p.310

2. Ibid.,p.311

These affordings in all their particulars, endless  
feuillage to me and to America, how can I do  
less than pass the clew of the union to them,  
to afford the like to you?" <sup>1</sup>

There is a poignancy to the concreteness of the follow-  
ing, wherein is reflected one aspect of the concept.

"The stanch California friendship -- the sweet air,  
the graves one, in passing, meets, solitary,  
just aside the horse-path;  
Down in Texas, the cotton-field, the negro-cabins,  
drivers driving mules or oxen before rude carts,  
cotton piled on banks and wharves;  
Encircling all, vast-darting, up and wide, the Amer-  
ican Soul, with equal hemispheres -- one Love,  
one Dilation or Pride." <sup>2</sup>

And finally an exerpt intended by Whitman to serve as  
a summary of his American "consciousness," and in which is men-  
tioned the elusiveness of what he attempts to convey in his words.  
In the last lines is mentioned specifically the characteristic  
effort of the poet to perpetuate his Being by associating it with  
the lands. Yet there is no subordination of self, nor any evi-  
dence of despair in the gesture.

"Males, females, immigrants, combinations -- the  
copiousness -- the individuality of the States,  
each for itself -- the moneymakers;  
Factories, machinery, the mechanical forces -- the  
windlass, lever, pulley -- All certainties,  
The certainty of space, increase, freedom, futurity,  
In space, the scattered islands, the sporades, the  
stars -- on the firm earth, the lands, my lands;  
O lands! all so dear to me -- what you are, (what-  
ever it is) I become a part of that, whatever  
it is." <sup>3</sup>

Thus far we have mentioned the magnitude of the Vista,  
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1. Whitman, Leaves, p.164

2: ibid., p.162

3: ibid., p.163

and its personality; the body of the concept, and its soul. Nevertheless, even for our modest purpose it is desirable that we include and consider a third feature of Whitman's concept of the Democracy -- its idealism.

It frequently seems that this idealism, the noblest feature of the concept (though it is scarcely in keeping with the spirit of the poet to call one portion of his work more or less noble than any other) leads Whitman to positions which even fair-minded and sympathetic readers can conclude to be inconsistent with his "creed" of universal equality. That his idealism should so lead him is not surprising. Any ideal implies the desirable, which in turn suggests the undesirable. The contrast is inevitably engendered, and with it, admiration, sympathy, liberality for the one -- scorn, animosity, intolerance for the other. From this should not be concluded that Whitman is merely the victim of his own enthusiasms, and that his idealism is pure and enerring. His exhortations have a definitely unhealthy quality that is revealed immediately Whitman departs from the "plane of instinct" that seems his most legitimate level.

Knowing what we do about Walt -- the questionable claims to his paternity, his supercilious attitude toward the matrimonial relationship of men and women, his narrow and indiscriminate view of women as a sex -- it is difficult for us to listen sympathetically to his repeated cry for "a strong, sweet

female race, a race of perfect mothers."

But these imperfections do not directly concern us. They are mentioned in contrast to those words that he spoke in perfect accord with the best of his feelings, but which have as a special, intrinsic quality, a tendency to present him in an uncomplimentary light which he, taken all in all, does not deserve.

One of the best reasons for considering the nature of the idealism of Whitman's Democracy in its most general aspect is by projecting it against a background of the poet's dominant theme -- the importance of the Individual Being. Considered in this way, does it remain an idealism, or merely an ideality? Mr. Sherman touches directly upon this point:

"By making himself important to the American people as the poetic interpreter of their political and social ideals, Whitman, as things are turning out, finds himself now mid-stream in the democratic movement which encompasses the earth. At the present time it is manifest that, in spite of difficulties, obstacles, and cross-currents, the central current of the world is making towards democracy. Whatever else it involves, democracy involves at least one grand salutary elementary admission, namely, that the world exists for the benefit and for the improvement of all the decent individuals in it." <sup>1</sup>

To complete the meaning we must have a few lines more from this entire passage, but it is also imperative that we pause to consider the "improvement of all the decent individuals." Permitting it to pass even as indirectly illustrative of a Whitman ideal would be a gross betrayal of the latter, a betrayal of the spirit of his work if not of the letter. Whitman makes a

1. Stuart Sherman, Americans, p.159

countless distinctions between decent and indecent individuals, "deserving" and "undeserving" classes, admirable and unadmirable institutions. Edmund Stedman says:

"In this poet's specification of the objects of his sympathy, the members of every class, lofty and lowly are named; yet there is an implication that the employer is inferior to the employee,...that the man of training, the 'civilizee' is less manly than the rough, the pioneer." <sup>1</sup>

Mr. Stedman's point seems well taken; such implications are numerous in the Leaves. On the other hand it affords Whitman no more than his just due to point out that, as opposed to the fundamental bases of his philosophy, these contentions are superficial.

To return to the uncompleted statement of Stuart Sherman:

"Now the indications are that those who oppose it (Democracy) are going to be outnumbered and overwhelmed. The movement is on, and it will not be stopped. Wise men, ambitious men, far-sighted men will not attempt to block it. They will adapt themselves to it, they will cooperate with it, they will direct and further it as the only way in which they may hope to be of any cheerful significance in the era opening before them. The ruling class, the statesmen, in all nations will find their mission and their honor progressively dependent upon their capacity for bringing the entire body of humanity into one harmonious and satisfactory life." <sup>2</sup>

Whitman himself championed such a concept of leadership not only among statesmen but among men of letters. "Literature is big," he explained to Horace Traubel, "only when used as an aid in the growth of the humanities -- a furthering of the cause of the masses -- a means whereby men may be revealed to each

1. Stedman, Poets of America; -p.383

2. Sherman, Americans, p.160



other as brothers."

This entiment, more than any other of the poet, removes from the path of enlightened understanding of Whitman, much of the debris of mulled-over, sterile, and pestiferous hair-splitting. It helps to reconcile, one to the other, certain of his attitudes that on the surface appear to be inconsistent. The explanation lies in a character-phenomena of the poet, the existence of which seems generally agreed upon by commentators approaching Whitman subjectively; namely, that his imagination was so active, his impressions so vital and forceful, his ego so unrestrained, that the Vista, as any other of his experiences, was "an experience not merely observed, but an experience repeated." In its purest aspect, the Vista was, to Whitman, a manifestation of his own self.

Previously was mentioned Whitman's allusion to an intercourse between man and his environment, an intercourse wherein one fondly absorbs the other, and these allusions justify such a contention. Then, too, Whitman's method of "imaginative contemplation" of an object, which method tends toward an identification of himself with the object, serves very well as something of a common denominator to many of the poet's paradoxes. Fragments illustrating this method in both general and specific instances are easily available, though as is the case with other fragments from Whitman's work, they are inadequate to the Whole.

"I speak the pass-word primieval -- I give the  
sign of Democracy;

By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot  
have their counterparts of on the same terms." 1

This furnishes what I have referred to as a "general"  
illustration; this next is obviously a specific.

"Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens;  
Within me zones, seas, cataracts, plants, vol-  
canoes, groups,  
Malaysia, Polynesia, and the great West Indian Isl  
Islands." 2

Those theorists who would have us believe that Whitman  
conceived and championed an ideal for "a simple, divine average"  
are scarcely convincing. Reducing Whitman's ideals to such pro-  
portions is a procedure with at least one important defect; that  
is, it disregards something that the poet himself never did dis-  
regard. It may be called "the wisdom of the race." On the whole  
it seems clear that Whitman never did disregard or anticipate the  
development of anything resembling a "new" human race -- a race  
of individuals one for one superior, physically, intellectually,  
and spiritually to the "old human race" that he knew. His faith,  
the basis for what he considered his most important message, was  
in the development of a new spirit in humanity, an awakening, in  
each individual, to his own significance and the significance of  
his fellows. It appears that the desire for the effusion of the  
Democratic spirit, was, in a man of Whitman's ruggedness and  
subjectivity, the natural result of his "awareness" of the in-  
dividual. It was man that he understood; "I am with you, and

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1. Whitman, Leaves, p. 54

2. Ibid., p.145

know how it is," he said. His vision was both individual and collective. Mankind was to flourish in each individual who came -- no matter when -- to realize himself, and to appreciate the wonder of his existence. Alfred Kreymborg spoke about this:

"The prophet is always right in stating his vision. Nor is the mass to blame if it fails to follow. The human race simply is not composed of equals...we are merely Whitman's 'same old human race' marching the march of the ages."<sup>1</sup>

As for his selection of America, the "Democracy," as the embodiment of his ideal, there is little ambiguity. America was all about him and about his ideal; he felt no need for a more subtle medium. Sherman records the following conversation between Whitman and Dudley:<sup>2</sup>

"While I seem to love America, and wish to see America prosperous, I do not seem able to bring myself to love America, to desire American prosperity, at the expense of some other nation."

"But must we not first take care of home?" was the next question put to him by Dudley.

"Perhaps," replies Whitman, "but what is home? To the humanitarian, what is home?"

We need nothing more enlightening than this reply, so far as Whitman's dominant theme is concerned. Where, indeed, to the poet, is any man's home? Where, ultimately, rests each man's pride and joy, hope and fear, failure and success, but in himself? "One world is aware, and by far the largest to me, and that is myself." That is linked with the theme of the Democracy, and in the spirit of the whole there is such immensity of per-

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1. Alfred Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength, p.213

2. Stuart Sherman, Americans, p. 215

spective that a vague confusion is imparted to it, but there is no inconsistency.

The poet often asks whether "laws, agreements, treaties promises" can effect the progress of the Vista. As active forces he has no faith in them, but rather rests his faith upon the individual's spirit, the bond between beings. He is confident of the potency of the latter.

"I will make the continent indissoluble;  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever  
shone upon;  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
With the love of comrades, with the life-long love  
of comrades." <sup>1</sup>

Regardless of what terms he used to indicate it, Whitman's theme is consistently based upon the individual, and upon the individuals awareness of himself. Other factors may have an importance, but in comparison with that of the Individual, they are secondary. It is not the democracy per se that Whitman cherishes; he makes that clear in Democratic Vistas. Rather does he cherish above all else the order that is necessary, the respect for the "wisdom of the ages" necessary to the flourishing of the Individual; consistent or no, he has "unshaken faith in the elements of the American masses, the composites, of both sexes, and even considered as individuals."

Because of its pertinency to this point, and also because it succeeds so well in summarizing the elusive ideal of

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1. Whitman, Leaves, p.127

"the good grey poet," the following quotation from Mr. Boynton serves admirably as a resume:

"Whitman's vision of life made him certain that there was a plan in the universe and a guiding power, and...the fit way to carry out such a design was by means of the purest sort of Democracy; that all other forms of government were only temporary obstacles in the course of things." <sup>1</sup>

Optimistic it may be, and delusory; yet therein lies the Vision of Walt Whitman.

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1. Percy Boynton, American Literature, p.342

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The thesis, "Walt Whitman: His Dominant Themes", written by Maurice H. Schy, has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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